

Meal Planning Basics

Planning meals ahead of time and scheduling time to cook is one of the best ways to improve the quality of our diets, and it can help save money too! By having a plan, you'll be less likely to turn to takeout or other convenience foods that may derail your nutrition plan. The steps below can help you create your own personalized meal plan.

Keep a food journal. Write down what you're currently eating for a few days. Try to get an accurate picture without judgement.

What foods do you want to eat more of? _____

Which do you want to eat less of? _____

What are some alternatives to the foods you want to eat less of? _____

Schedule time to plan. Find a time to get together with everyone in your household to talk about what you'll eat for the upcoming week. Even if you're a family of one, put it on your calendar. Start small and plan two or three dinners, or even one meal a week to start out. Assign who is going to cook what, and write a list of what you'll need. Look in your fridge and pantry and see what needs to be used up.

I will make my meal plan on _____ at _____ I need to use up: _____

Collect recipes. Make a list of your go-to meals, or look online for recipes for your favorite takeout dishes. Where will you keep your go to recipes? Do you prefer to save them digitally on Google Drive or Pinterest? Or keep a physical file folder or binder? Write the page number of your favorite cookbook recipes in the front cover, or use bookmarks and tabs. See the list of cookbooks and recipe websites below for more ideas.

My favorite recipes are: _____

My favorite websites are: _____

My favorite cookbooks are: _____

Practice batch cooking. To save time and effort, choose a recipe you can cook a lot of for multiple meals. Slow cooker or instant pot recipes like curries, stews, and chilis all cook well in a large volume and freeze well. If you don't already have one, consider getting a slow cooker or Instant Pot.

I will make a batch of _____ on _____
You can also start small with batch cooking. Try making an extra portion or two of dinner to have for lunch the next day.

Assign tasks and schedule cooking time. Make sure you know who is going to cook what when. Look at your recipes and see how long they're supposed to take. If you're a novice cook, expect it will take longer than the recipe says. Stick with simple recipes with few ingredients so you don't get frustrated.

Up the veggies. Look back over your food journal. How many fruits and vegetables are you eating a day? Increase the portion sizes of vegetables you already eat, and think about where you can incorporate more vegetables into your favorite dishes. For instance, add broccoli, spinach, zucchini, or mushrooms to your favorite pasta sauce. Roast your favorite root vegetables or brassicas (broccoli family of vegetables) during your weekly batch cooking.

Use a meal planning app or platform. Like meal kit services, there are lots of meal planning apps and platforms and apps out there and some are better than others. Here are a few to consider:

- MealLime: <https://www.mealime.com/>
 - Free smartphone app with recipe database, and good level of customization to dietary restrictions and preferences. Can create grocery lists.
- EatLove: <https://www.eatlove.is/>
 - Through this app and web platform you can create your own meal plan and connect with a registered dietitian nutritionist to help you optimize your plan to meet your nutritional needs. Free two week trial, around \$10/month after that.
- Paprika: <https://www.paprikaapp.com/>
 - Helpful for organizing your own recipes, but doesn't have a recipe database. Basic version is free.

Try a Meal Kit Service. There are dozens of premade meal and meal kit delivery services these days, and some are better than others. While not necessary to your meal planning success, they can help serve as a source of inspiration when you feel like you're in a dinner rut. And they make the whole process a bit easier by delivering all the ingredients you need. You can try out a few different options and keep the recipes to use on your own. Here are a few to consider:

- Green Chef: <https://greenchef.com/>
 - Organic ingredients, meals intended to take 30 mins or less. Vegan, paleo, or flexible meal plans available.
- Purple Carrot: <https://www.purplecarrot.com/>
 - Vegan, has both meal kits and prepared meals.
- Hello Fresh: <https://www.hellofresh.com/>
 - Portioned, premeasured ingredients. Larger portion sizes available. Meal options include pescatarian, vegetarian, family friendly, and quick and easy.
- Sun Basket: <https://sunbasket.com/> (

- Organic and sustainable ingredients. Lots of meal plan options including diabetes-friendly, paleo, gluten free, Mediterranean, and premade meal options available. Registered Dietitian Nutritionists on staff. They have a few "oven ready" -- no prep-- meal options available as well)

Have a backup plan. This is probably the most important step. Life happens and we're not always able to follow through with our plans. Freeze a few servings of a batch cooked meal like chili or curry, and research a few healthy takeout options in your area.

My emergency meal is: _____

My favorite healthy takeout restaurant is: _____